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ABSTRACT

Designed to instruct teachers as well as high school or college students in improving their writing, the Christensen Rhetoric Program is a sequential, cumulative program, published in kit form. The kit includes a script with lectures for the teacher, directions for using 200 transparencies on an overhead projector, and student workbooks which correlate with the transparencies. Avoiding traditional discussions of errors, the program achieves a positive approach by examining sentences and paragraphs chosen from the work of almost 100 professional writers (e.g., Bellow, Churchill, Hemingway). A student completing this program gradually masters the construction of cumulative sentences through the use of free modifiers and improves not only his style but also his literary invention and organization. (MF)

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THE CHRISTENSEN RHETORIC PROGRAM

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One of the century's most significant innovations in the teaching of English has become available to schools throughout the country with publication this month of "the new rhetoric" devised by Dr. Francis Christensen, professor of English at the University of Southern California.

The "Christensen Rhetoric Program" is a new way of teaching high school and college students, as well as interested adults, how to improve their writing. It is more than just a book. It is a sequential and cumulative program, published in the form of a program kit (Harper and Row: Evanston) which costs a school about $225 and is designed to instruct the teacher as well as the students. The program exploits the dynamic possibilities of the overhead projector, and instruction is centered in about 200 visuals or transparencies, bound in ten slim volumes with a script for the teacher. The script includes lectures for the teacher, directions for exposing the transparencies, and various other aids. For each student there is a Workbook, tied in to what is being shown on the screen.

Dr. Christensen's program is, in a sense, an application of the "new grammar" to the teaching of composition. Only a few basic grammatical principles, however, are involved; the significance of Dr. Christensen's work lies in the ways he demonstrates the operation of these principles in the techniques of twentieth-century professional writers. Every sentence and paragraph shown on the screen is the work of a professional writer and is attributed to the writer — James Agee, Conrad Aiken, Saul Bellow, Winston Churchill, Northrop Frye, Ernest Hemingway, Eugene O'Neill, John Updike, Thomas

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Wolfe, and nearly a hundred more. There are no confected textbook sentences or paragraphs.

At every point the treatment of the composing process is positive. There are no "Thou shalt not's," no lists of errors to avoid, no misbegotten sentences or scrambled paragraphs to be set to rights. The approach to the sentences and paragraph is radically different from that of all other textbooks in that this work rests on a first-hand inductive study of contemporary writing to ascertain the shapes that professional writers — those who make their living and their reputations by writing — give to their sentences and to the groups of sentences we call paragraphs.

Through the program's 200 transparencies, students are taught principles deduced from the practice of contemporary professional writers, and in the Workbook students are given the opportunity to put these principles to work. Dr. Christensen's inductive study of contemporary prose reveals as the most interesting and significant feature of sentences what is called in his program "free modifiers." These free modifiers, almost unrecognized in traditional textbooks, are the principal working unit of the professional writer. It is these modifiers, not subordinate clauses, that make it possible for the professional to say much in little — to make his writing concrete and specific without making it prolix, to get the movement or rhythm that is the life of prose. The program is designed to teach the use of these free modifiers as the way to achieve true maturity in writing.

The program is carefully articulated. It starts with four basic principles, proceeds to a review of the grammatical constructions used as free modifiers, and then, step by step, builds up the students' repertoire of constructions and sentence types, covering descriptive, narrative, and expository writing. Finally, it applies the same principles to the analysis and composition of the expository paragraph, giving teacher and student an understanding of the sentence-by-sentence structure of the well-written paragraph.

At the beginning the student works only with sentences. He advances at a steady pace, by small increments, learning only one thing at a time. The lessons are sequential, and what the student learns, he continues to practice, so that the program is cumulative. It becomes internalized as the student's writing habits. Dr. Christensen believes that anyone who learns to use the full range of free modifiers will be a skillful writer.

The program is not a full course in composition. Of the three main divisions of rhetoric — invention, arrangement, and style (or, alternatively, discovery, organization, and expression) — its main concern is with style or expression. Whatever anyone has to say in writing he must funnel through his sentences and paragraphs. The nature and design of the program is such, however, that the concern for structure in the sentence and paragraph laps over and becomes an aid and guide to discovery and organization. Solving the problem of *how to say* helps solve the problem of *what to say* and in what order.

The principle that underlies the entire program, Dr. Christensen says, is that of "addition." A writer makes his point clearer by adding. The use of masking and overlays in the programmed transparencies makes this process of accretion dramatic and meaningful. The sentence or the paragraph grows, and grows more meaningful, as each new modifier is shown on the screen. The visuals and the accompanying aids may be used with a group of 20 or one of 200, depending on the efficiency of the projector and the screen.

Although the complete Christensen Rhetoric program is now being published for the first time, parts of it have already been widely used with groups of varying ages and ability. Recently the Council for Basic Education reported to Dr. Christensen that his material was used "with good response" in 1968 at the Yale Summer High School's program for a hundred college-bound, under-privileged youngsters — boys from rural Mississippi and New Hampshire, from the ghettos of Harlem, Detroit and Kansas City, from the adobe fringes of Tucson and Corpus Christi.

More than ten years ago Dr. Christensen began developing the new rhetoric in his USC classrooms, especially in the writing course given for English majors who are prospective teachers. Gradually over the years he reported his findings in articles in professional journals. These attracted wide attention among teachers and linguistics scholars, and brought Dr. Christensen dozens of invitations to lecture in experimental programs, workshops, institutes, and college classes. He has accepted invitations in fifteen states and has lectured at many national professional meetings, at the First International Conference on the Teaching of English (Vancouver), and at four of the eleven Curriculum Development Centers funded by the U. S. Office of Education.

All of Dr. Christensen's articles have been widely reprinted, sometimes with permission but often pirated. Thousands of copies of his articles have been dittoed or xeroxed by teachers for use in their classrooms, and the National Council of Teachers of English reprinted five of his articles for distribution to the thousands of teachers in NDEA Institutes. Also used in the summer institutes were two units which he prepared in 1965 for the Nebraska Curriculum Development Center. These were published in 1966 by the English Institute Materials Center under the title *Rhetoric of the Short Units of Composition* and became the Center's best seller.

Last year Dr. Christensen collected and revised six of his articles for reprinting (Harper and Row: New York) in a small book titled *Notes Toward A New Rhetoric: Six Essays for Teachers.* Already widely used in teacher training institutes and in college composition courses, the book includes essays titled "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," "A Lesson from Hemingway," "Sentence Openers," "A Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph," "In Defense of the Absolute," and "Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Modifiers Again." Many of the principles put forward in these essays are elaborated in the new Christensen Rhetoric program.

His most important work, Dr. Christensen says, is his rhetoric program, and he sees it as one step toward accomplishing a goal he set some years ago: to work a radical change in the teaching of composition so that the millions of hours spent by children and adults in English classes will be less confusing and less frustrating. He is cheered by the responses from teachers and students who have tried his program, and he sees signs of change for the better.